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RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 4093  
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1496  
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ SEP MONTEVIDEO 9816  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LIMA 001309

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [SNAR](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PE](#)  
SUBJECT: VRAE: GOP MOUNTS RESCUE OP FOR STRANDED SOLDIERS

REF: LIMA 1299

Classified By: DCM James Nealon for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: At approximately 1100 hrs on September 4, Peruvian armed forces successfully overcame small arms fire, weather delays and capability limitations, and rescued five wounded soldiers stranded in the aftermath of the September 2 Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso, SL) attack on a Peruvian air force (FAP) helicopter (ref). The attack and rescue are perceived as symbolically significant and government troops remain in the area and continue to battle SL forces. Major challenges include the area's rough terrain, altitude, and topography, in addition to security forces' lack of intelligence, logistical lift and proper equipment. The US provided only modest support to the rescue operation, despite prominent political leaders public call for US assistance. End summary.

¶2. (C) Peruvian armed forces successfully overcame daunting obstacles, including intense small arms fire, to rescue by air five wounded soldiers trapped in the wake of the September 2 SL skirmish and subsequent attack on a Peruvian air force (FAP) helicopter. The bodies of the three KIA crew members still remain at the site, along with the rest of the patrol (reportedly around 20-30). Military contacts indicate that an additional group of 50-odd combat soldiers arrived over land from Huachocolpa on September 3 to reinforce the besieged original patrol.

#### Observations

¶3. (C) The September 2 latest attack is significant: after several previous attempts, this is the first time since 1999 SL has downed a helicopter. Besides the high-profile blow, the importance of the successful rescue loomed large, since experts acknowledge that a failure could have had a devastating impact on soldiers' morale. Authorities are uncertain on how the soldiers' continued engagement will proceed given the troops' bare-bones logistical abilities against an enemy who is more used to the area's rough terrain, high altitude, and topography. Dense jungle make it nearly impossible to spot SL columns' locations at any given moment. Elevations of around 12,000 feet makes the use of heavy armored helicopters unfeasible, even if the FAP had them. The FAP is understandably wary of sending helicopters back to the same location for fear of additional attacks, and dropping special forces onto a neighboring hill could mean several days of trekking over steep terrain to get to the site of the attack.

¶4. (C) Embassy military and security experts are in contact with their Peruvian counterparts, but operational security (OPSEC) for the ongoing mission is tight. For this reason the following information cannot be confirmed.

-- Since the original patrol was reinforced by another fifty fresh troops (infantry or special forces), it suggests that more ground reinforcements could be inserted to fight the SL if needed.

-- The logic to remain engaged with the SL in this strategically unimportant area only makes military sense if the security forces are sufficiently strong enough to inflict meaningful damage on the SL.

-- A knowledgeable analyst cautioned that SL could be diverting security forces' attention away from its true next target to some place else in the VRAE.

-- The medical evacuation of the five WIA soldiers was accomplished via helicopter -- a dangerous proposition since there is still thought to be up to four SL elements holding the high ground above the government soldiers.

-- It is unclear if SL was able to recover the two crew-served weapons (7.62 mm MAGs) and belts of ammunition that were onboard the downed MI-17 helicopter.

-- We understand that the FAP and Army (EP) currently have no more than five mission-capable MI-17s. None of these craft are armored or configured as gunships.

-- Should the GOP security forces decide to persist in the area, they will have to locate the enemy and then "shoot, move and communicate" to prevent any other helicopters from being shot down.

#### Political Ramifications:

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¶5. (C) Prominent political leaders publicly called for the US to assist in the rescue operation. (Embassy assistance to the rescue operation was limited to providing appropriate recent satellite imagery, though the density of triple-canopy jungle makes this imagery of limited use.) Police Director General Manuel Hidalgo also inquired about the possible use of NAS helicopters for the evacuation. We informed him that altitude, weather and hostile conditions precluded the use of NAS' UH-1Is for the mission. APRA Congressman (and former President of Congress and the Congressional Defense Committee) Luis Gonzales Posada remarked on September 3 that Peru was being "abandoned by international cooperation" in its fight against terrorism and narcotrafficking. Earlier in the week, Defense Minister Rafael Rey made a similar remark, saying it was a shame Peru did not have U.S. assistance in the VRAE. Rey later backed off from some of his statements in light of the Colombia DCA controversy that took place at the Bariloche UNASUR meeting of presidents.

#### Comment: Another Wake-up Call?

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¶6. (C) This incident illustrates once again the Peruvian military's shortcomings in confronting the remnants of Sendero Luminoso in the VRAE. To date, there has been little indication that the GOP can be serious about investing greater resources in the VRAE. The immediate finger-pointing, whether aimed at us or at Peruvian political actors, hampers the political debate and leaves the issues unresolved until the next bloody skirmish. We have attempted to assist the GOP in identifying and defining workable solutions, and will continue to do so. End Comment.  
MCKINLEY